

UXPin

10 ProTips to a Smarter UX Design Process

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Jerry Cao is a content strategist at UXPin where he gets to put his overly active imagination to paper every day. In a past life, he developed content strategies for clients at Brafton and worked in traditional advertising at DDB San Francisco. In his spare time he enjoys playing electric guitar, watching foreign horror films, and expanding his knowledge of random facts. Follow him on Twitter.

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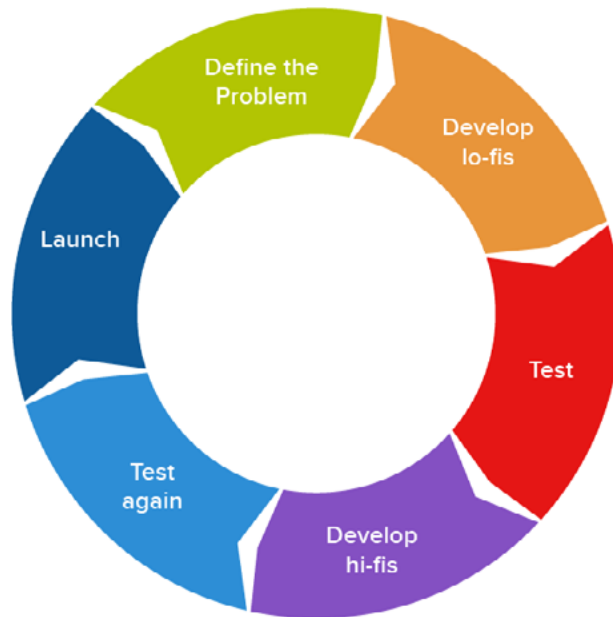
Every so often, it's important for a designer to fall back in love with the art of design. Design processes might seem more scientific than creative, but their constraints generate creativity. A process supports design by giving it a framework. The right process pivots the perspective to uncover insights that lead to better design.

Everything is designed. Few things are designed well.

Brian Reed

At some point in a designers career, there comes a point when you hit a creative wall.

The reasons can vary. Maybe you've been working too fast and too hard and burnt out. Maybe you work in a non-creative environment and contend with a lot of resistance each day. Maybe you've unknowingly become a repeat performer, putting out the same work over and over again. Maybe you lack confidence and copy others too often. Or maybe you're just bored.



Establishing a design process empowers you to confidently innovate because you can map the inception of an idea to how it evolved. Innovation requires an ability to step outside the norm. Creative design is generated through observing what you think you know in a different way.

Whatever the reason for a new approach, the benefits of a defined design process helps teams work collaboratively. Effective communication reduces risk of failure because there's a shared mental model amongst the team. Outcomes are improved because a process creates transparency, which is essential for trust. And most importantly, the right design process fuels creative thinking and infuses your daily routine with play.

In theory, a design process should support you and curb a design from taking on a life of it's own. Your process should never be so ideal that it can't change. Every project has limitations. Sometimes you're limited on time or cash-flow or resources. If you're a beginner, your own skills limits the complexity of your processes. Your design process must adapt to all these real-life constraints.

Here's 10 tips for improving your own design process:

1. Define the problem before hunting for solutions.

Einstein once said, *"If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions."*

Many designers make a fatal flaw in thinking problems are obvious. Most of the time obvious problems are merely symptoms of the real problem. You will know when you've found the real problem to solve because it will eliminate a lot of other issues at the same time. If you're playing whack-a-mole with issues, it's obvious that you haven't identified the problem yet.



Photo credit: Jo Quinlan. Creative Commons 2.0.

As described in the free e-book *Web UI Best Practices*, start all your design projects with the “How Might We...” approach of design thinking. Remember that before you design the product correctly, you first need to ensure you’re designing the correct product.

Definitely check out some of the exercises used by Stanford’s own design school.

2. Know your user like an old friend.

A developer once told me she was building a product for “everybody”. That might sound reasonable for a mass market product, but you can’t create meaningful use cases if you can’t pinpoint a specific user.



Without meaningful use cases, it’s hard to know what your MVP (minimum viable product) needs to be or how to create a strategic product plan. Scope creep is a direct result of not knowing your users well enough. Designers should always know the specific type of person who needs specific features from a product. All great products strive to solve a handful of problems as simply as possible, in a way that’s easily understood by the people who need it.

Conduct user research, create personas, and start mapping out user scenarios and flows. Anything that puts you deeper into the mind of the user is an investment in successful design.

3. Consider extreme solutions to the problem.

Part of the fun in designing is going a little off the deep end with ideas. Celebrate the opportunity to think big.

Break conventions just for the sake of it. Think beyond a single device. Storyboard a day in the life of a user and see where all the possible touchpoints could occur. Play! Bust out the markers and crayons. Give yourself over to an exercise of free association. Dance like nobody's watching. Go on a mental walk-about and discover ideas that inspire and excite you.



Photo credit: Barrel

Don't spend weeks (unless you can afford the time) but take a creative pause to connect your unconscious mind to the problem you need to solve.

If you want a real-life example of the power of extreme creativity, take a look at [Duolingo](#). The app feels more like a smartphone game than a language learning platform. The visual design is the opposite of what you'd expect with its animal icons, casual copy, and fun colors. From an interaction design standpoint, the app even uses in-game currency called “lingots” to entice users. It's completely unconventional and might sound questionable on paper, but the proof is in the numbers – the company is [valued at \\$470M](#) by Google Capital as of June 2015.

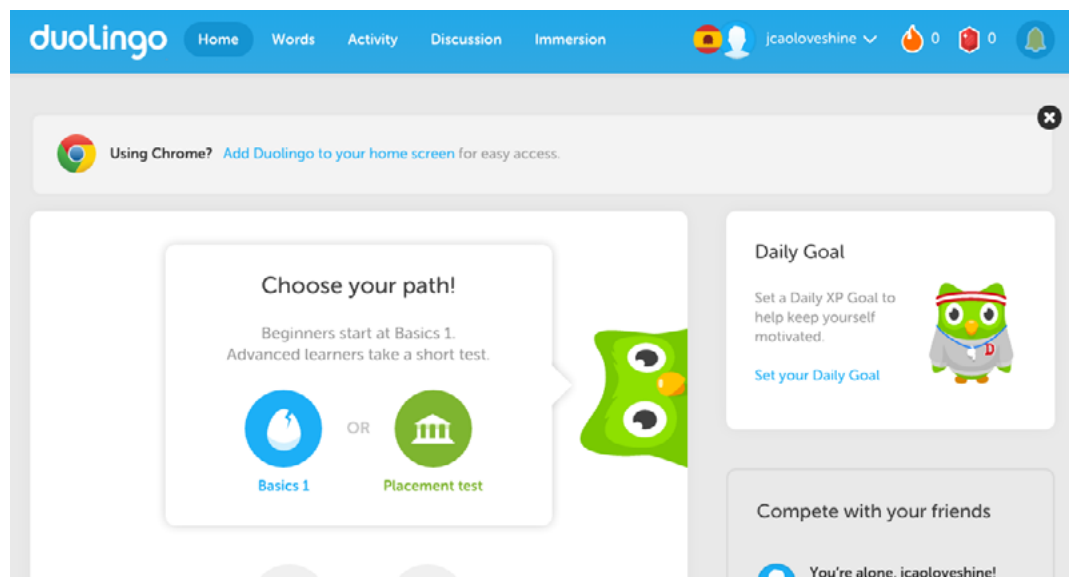


Photo credit: [Duolingo](#)

Seek inspiration outside of your immediate industry, and you'd be surprised by how effective (and creative) your design solutions become.

4. Establish a hypothesis to test before you create a prototype.

Controls are your friend. Say it with me, “*controls are my friend*”.

A hypothesis introduces a way to seek truth. Every design has a foundation grounded by something strong enough to build upon. The foundation is the scaffolding that everything else hangs upon. Think of it like an essay's thesis statement. It is the heart of the design. And it's where your use cases come into play far ahead of development work.



Photo credit: [Duncan Hull](#). [Creative Commons](#).

Brainstorm as many scenarios as possible and whiteboard with your team. Run a design studio exercise in which participants sketch their solutions for how to complete specific tasks and see how closely your design aligns to the expectation of potential users. You should always explore (and iterate) your hypothesis as one of the first steps in design.

For a useful framework, check out Maximilian Wambach's (Interaction Designer at Ebay) approach. The "If [action] then [outcome] because [customer need/problem]" mindset elevates the importance of design in a business, making it the starting point for delivering customer value.



5. Collaborate with a diverse group on the best solution.

If your design is solid, it should hold up to critique and discussion.. A group of people from different backgrounds who possess different experiences will lead you to better solutions. Consider setting up a Think Tank of stakeholders who can share their unique perspectives on how your design can be improved. Work with your design manager to ensure that the product team still has the final say with regards to critique, otherwise you fall into the trap of design-by-committee.

6. Create a story with documentation

Don't let your design assets become road kill.

Produce documentation that tells a story. Your personas are the cast of characters. Your use cases are key parts of the screen play. Your wireframes are the stage. Your process flows and user flows are the choreography. Your UI kit is the set design. Everything relates and feeds into each other.

Persona



JONATHAN VIZZIER

"Design isn't just how it looks, it's how it works."

Demographics:

- 27 years old
- Masters in Visual Design
- Visual Designer
- Single
- Earns \$85K per year

list [text](#)

Behaviors & Beliefs:

- Obsessive over visual quality
- Hates when product managers use the word "just" before describing last-minute tasks
- Wants to be as involved in the design process as possible
- Loathes jargon, wishes people would get to the point

Characteristics & Attributes (0 to 5)

- Design experience: 3
- Education: 4
- Tech Savviness: 5
- Ambition: 5
- Workload: 5

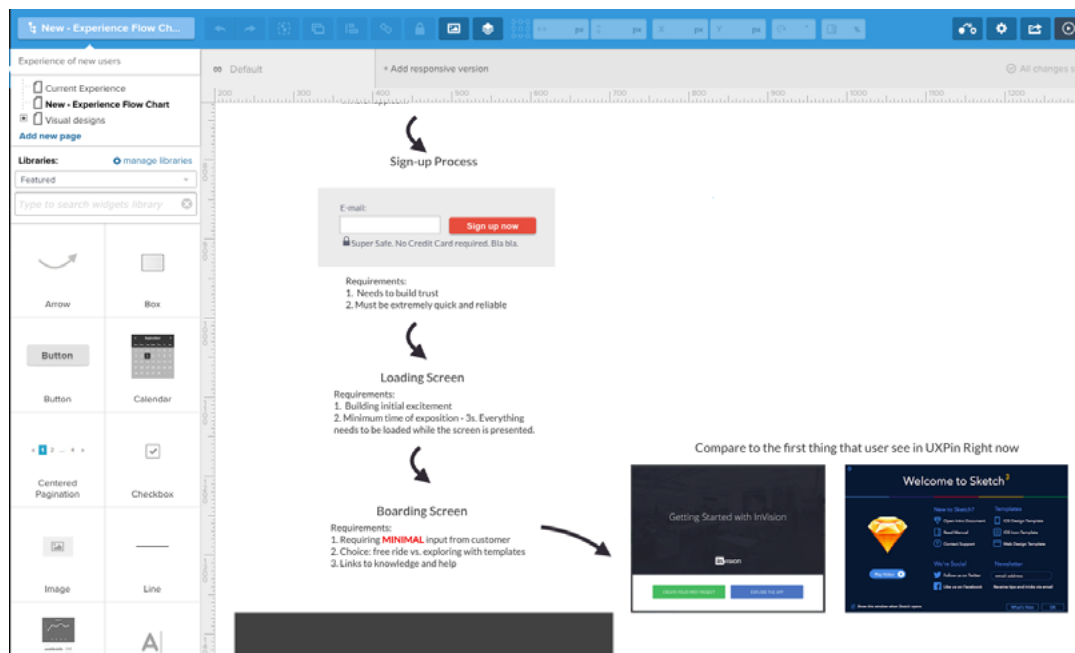
Goals:

- To build a strong portfolio, regardless of whatever job I'm at
- To start mastering UX design by the end of this year for a career transition
- To rise up in his company and start getting assigned larger-profile projects
- Wants to help the product team see the value of emotional design, not just "core KPIs"

User scenario

As a...	I want to...	So that...	Scenario 1
Marketer	Quickly offer feedback on designs	Everyone can see the possible revisions and I can get back to my daily non-design work	It's 7:30PM on a Friday night. John should be home already, but he's staying late wrapping up the copy for a new landing page set to go live next week. He sees an email from the designer on another project asking for some emergency copy since they just realized the header and first paragraph is still in Lorem Ipsum. He feels frustrated because he asked the designers to insert some rough copy as a starting point. John's already clocked in 50 hours for the week, so he wants a smooth way to give his feedback as easily and quickly as possible so he can head home.

User flow



Many times documentation is ignored because it lacks context. Think of your design assets and artifacts as puzzle piec-

es. On their own the pieces have little value, but put together they build a picture that tells a story.

Don't get tunnel vision and obsess over perfecting one design document. Instead, make sure the relationships between each design stage is easily understood since many people other than yourself will review the documentation.

Minimize documentation that doesn't move the design forward. The documents we described above all help the team iterate towards the final product, but heavy reports gather dust. If your documentation isn't usable, there's no reason to create it.

7. Design and test on paper.

Rapid paper prototyping can be done at any stage and always helps inform design decisions.

Give yourself or a group a set amount of time to quickly iterate ideas. It's very easy to become attached to a design once it's move into pixel form. Sketching and prototyping on paper, however, keeps your mind searching for possibilities.

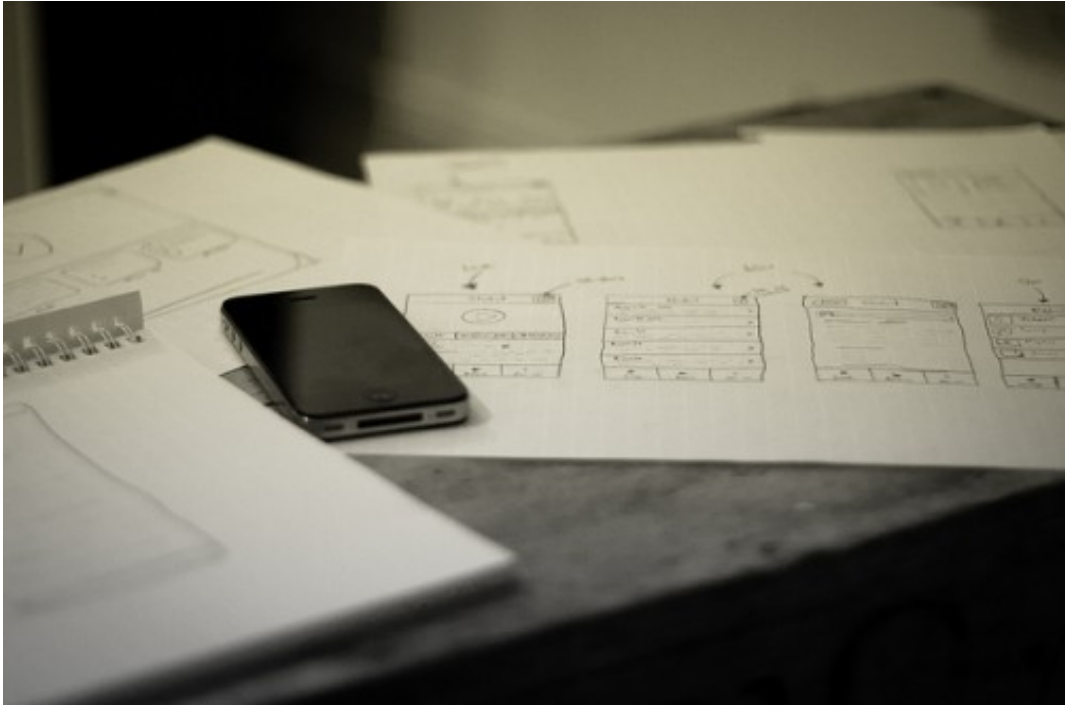


Photo credits: “App sketching”. Johan Larsson. Creative Commons.

Draw out sketches for the sake of exploring your own ideas, then run a quick hallway usability test with 3-5 people. Afterwards, you can move to a digital platform for wireframing and higher-fidelity prototyping.

As soon as you come up with a design you think is solid, start testing it by conducting a virtual walk-through. Talk through the different use cases with a partner so you can help each other notice any gaps or potential flaws. Once your partner understands how the design works, they can act as the “human computer” for operating the paper prototype during usability testing.

Follow [these guidelines](#) for testing your paper prototype, and only move to designing in pixels once you're confident the content structure and user flows make sense.

8. Post artifacts on a wall.

Having tons of post-its on a wall might seem cliché, but there's a sound reason behind the method.



Source: "Booksprint Futurish '14." *Time's Up*. Creative Commons.

Think about all those detective shows. When a detective is working a case, a wall is transformed into a map of the crime. All of the witnesses and suspects are displayed with the evidence that's been collected.

The same thing occurs when you're designing for specific users. Just like a detective, a UX designer needs to map the connection of the problem to the users and then link it directly to the solution. The physical artifacts aren't for show. They become tools for design, especially for explorative exercises like affinity diagrams. Having a shared place for a team to visit at any time helps infuse UX methodologies into everyone's workflow.

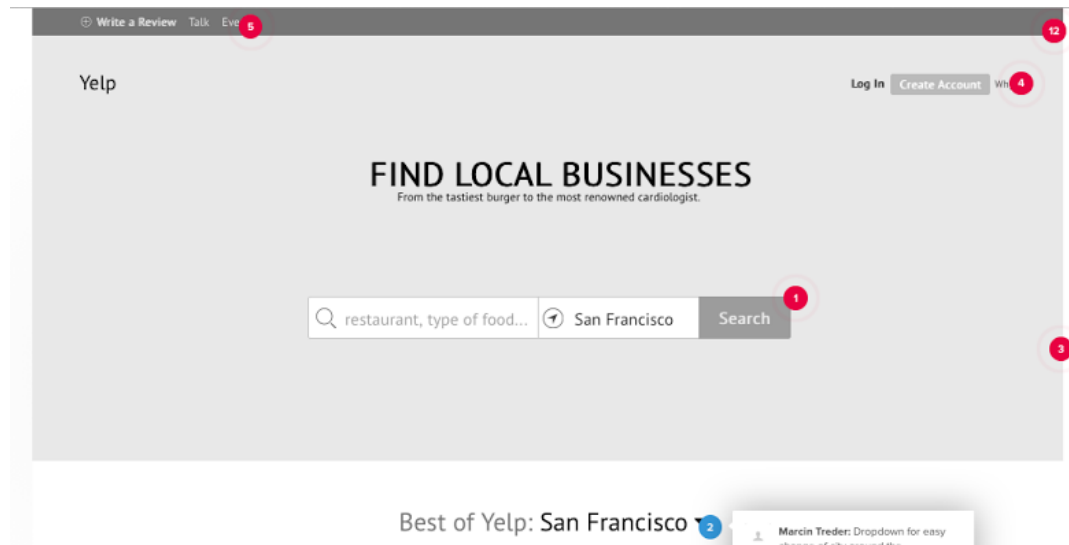
As this excellent UX stickynote tutorial suggests, limit yourself to just one idea per sticky and leave some margins in case you need to add more notes.

9. Create a lo-fi prototype to test.

Lo-fidelity prototypes can be created with basic HTML, eyenote or Powerpoint, paper cut-outs, storyboards, and specialized prototyping tools like UXPin.

As soon as you move into development, certain restrictions are inevitable (browser compatibility, site performance, etc.). It's important to explore and test an interactive design pre-development because it will better inform your user stories,

provide developers with rich detail, assist in identifying the right technical solution and provide a usable design to test with users.



Source: [Low-Fidelity Yelp Redesign Exercise](#) in [UXPin](#)

Low-fidelity prototypes allow you to link up multiple wireframes to create flows. In this way, you can test the effectiveness of the order of things, rather than just the elements that the user sees on-screen. You can validate that sequences of interactions / actions make sense for users.

Prototypes are the perfect bridge between design and development. After all, developers speak the language of interactions. Annotated wireframes are useful, but a prototype reduces the likelihood for error because there's less room for interpretation.

10. Build collaboratively.

No designer is an island. Too often people work for too long by themselves.

Just like pair coding has been proven to reduce technical error (because it's easy to become code blind), try Cooper's pair design technique for better analysis and iteration. Working with another person generates motivation for self-improvement, establishes a sense of teamwork, and balances productivity by sharing energy.

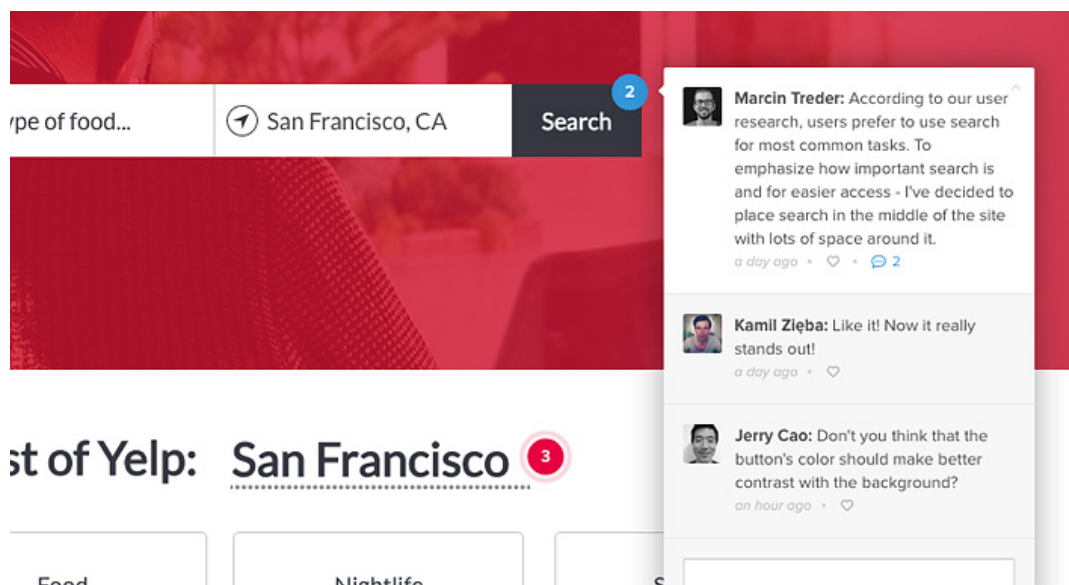


Photo credit: [UXPin](#)

It's pretty old school to think that you can only design well when you're tethered to a desk away from everyone. That

idea is as outdated as smoking in the office. By following the guidelines described in *Design Collaboration in the Enterprise*, your projects can be fun and collaborative.

Ready to create your own design process?

Get started with the UX Design Process Map below, then start a [free trial](#) in UXPin so you can design with your team together!

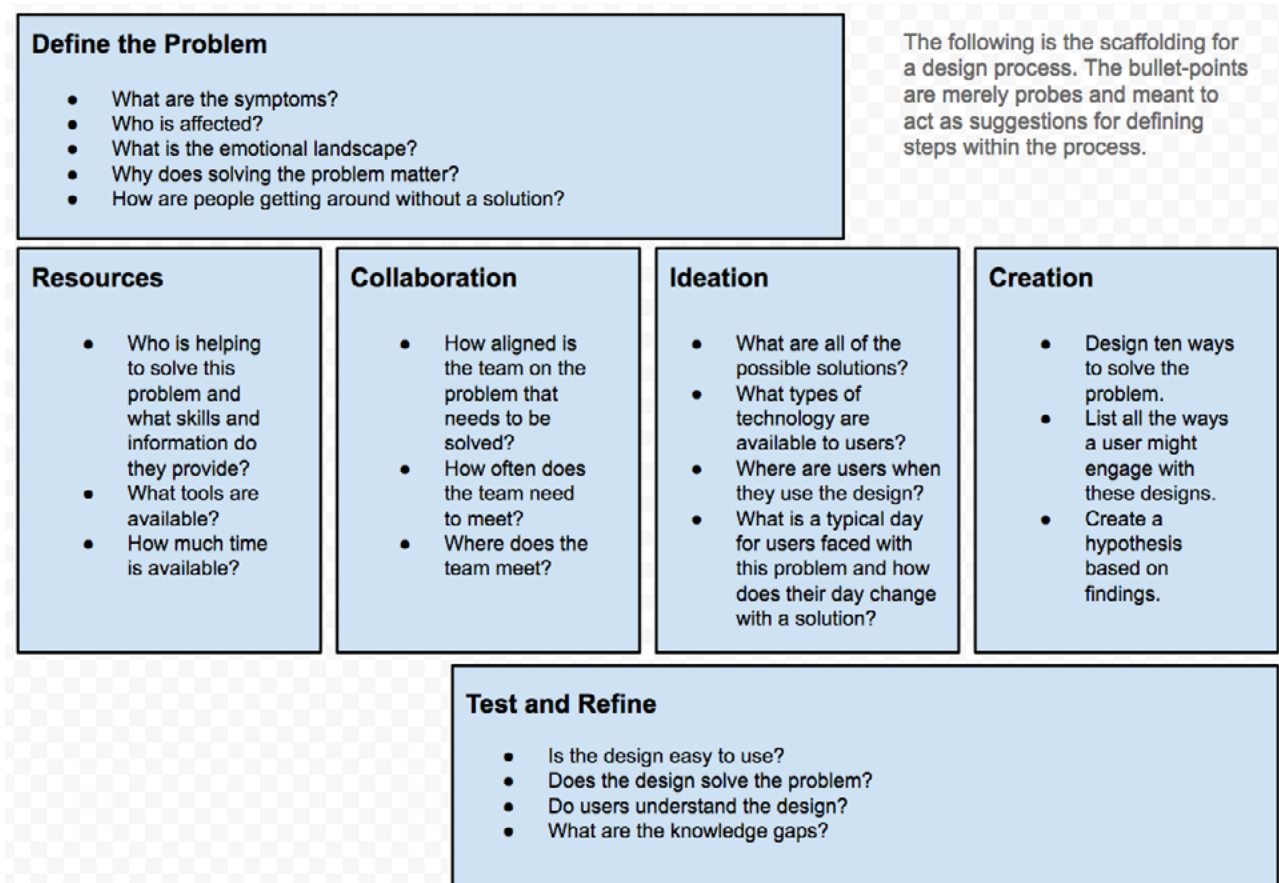
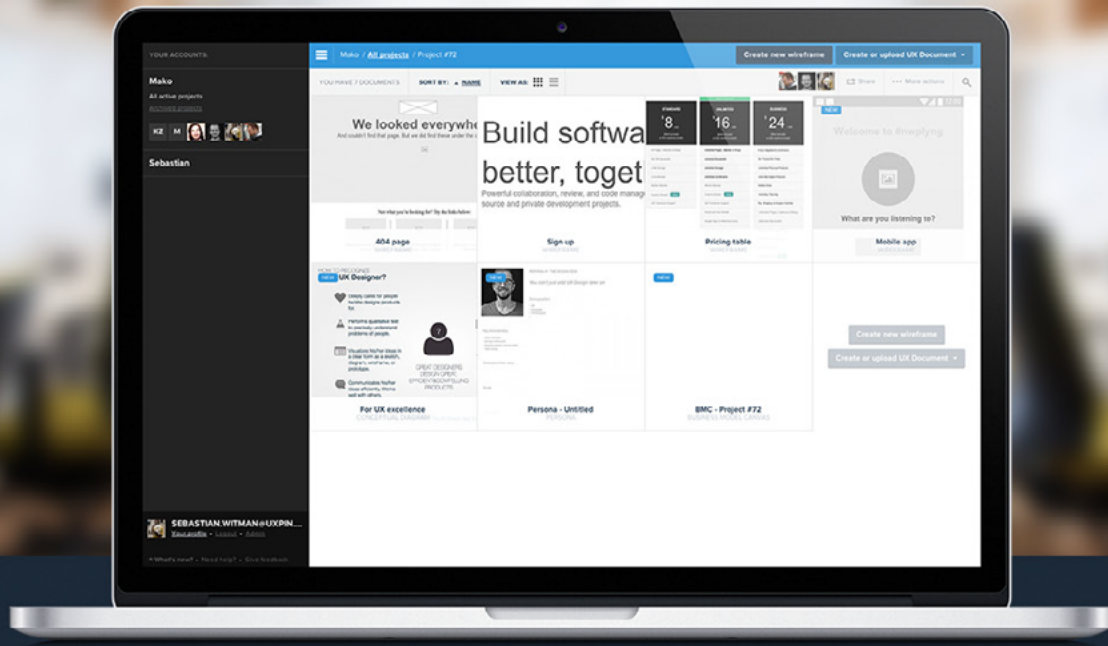


Photo credit: [Jessica Lowry](#)



- ✓ Complete prototyping framework for web, mobile, and wearables
- ✓ Collaboration and feedback for any team size
- ✓ Lo-fi to hi-fi design in a single tool
- ✓ Integration with Photoshop and Sketch